

ARIZONA VETERANS' SERVICE ADVISORY COMMISSION
American Legion Post 30, 825 E. Main, Springerville, AZ 85938
Saturday - April 12, 2008

M I N U T E S

Call to Order - The meeting was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Chairman Dingwall.

Present

Advisory Commissioners

Tom Dingwall
Kenneth Yamanouchi
Gary Fredericks
Phillip Quochytewa
Webb Ellis
Tom Heaney
Larry McKim
Linda Fulkerson
Bill Lunsford

Arizona Department of Veterans' Services

Pam Rodriguez, Veterans' Benefits Counselor
Lee Borgen, Veterans' Benefits Counselor

Other Guests

Cathy Cosgrove, American Legion District 6
Commander
Jack Husten, County Supervisor candidate
Corinne Boales, VA Clinic Show Low
Diane Shuster, VA Clinic Show Low
George Godknecht, VA Clinic Show Low

Opening – Chairman Dingwall opened the meeting at 10:00 a.m. with the posting of the colors by the Hopi Color Guard. Color guard members were Clifford Quotsaquahu, US Army, Viet Nam, Leonard Talaswima, US Army, Viet Nam and Eugene Tallas, US Air Force (retired), Desert Storm, Afghanistan and Iraq. Chairman Dingwall invited members of the audience to introduce themselves.

Chairman Dingwall noted that Cathy Cosgrove, American Legion District 6 Commander, had asked if she could speak for the purpose of presentations and he invited her to proceed. She presented three American Legion awards to American Legion Post 80 for excellence in membership recruiting.

Chairman Dingwall asked the Commissioners to introduce themselves with a brief bio.

Chairman Dingwall thanked the American Legion for their hospitality and thanked VA Show Low Clinic staff and the Show Low Veterans' Benefits Counselor (VBC) for attending. He commended Commissioners Ellis and Quochytewa for their hard work in setting up the meeting.

Minutes - The minutes of March 13, 2008 were approved as distributed with minor corrections. (Approval moved by Commissioner McKim and seconded by Commissioner Yamanouchi.)

Chairman Dingwall advised that he wanted to highlight two items in the March minutes.

- HB 2023 (by Representative Jonathon Paton) concerns authorization for a "Support Our Troops" license plate. The monies derived from plate sales will go to the Support Our Troops organization in Florida rather than staying here in Arizona. Deputy Director Mike Klier noted that the plate would compete with the "Freedom" plate currently marketed as a "Military Support/Freedom" license plate available through the Arizona Department of Motor Vehicles. The Commission sent a letter to Representatives Paton and McClure, Speaker Weiers, the House Transportation and Rules Committee; copy to Senate President Bee and Minority Leader Arzberger expressing their opposition to the bill.
- The Commission staunchly supports the Veterans' Research Council's Final Report to the Governor and correlative legislation particularly on those recommendations that do not impact State expenditures.

Commissioner Dingwall turned the meeting over to Commissioners Ellis and Quochoyewq as they are the Commissioners assigned to Region 2. He reminded the audience that we are a State agency and can not authoritatively address Federal issues.

Commissioner Ellis thanked everyone for coming and advised that although we are a State agency we do keep a record of these meetings and we do pass information to the appropriate people for Federal issues. Chairman Ellis asked that people use the green question/comment cards so that we have a first hand record of their concerns and a way to get back to them if needed.

Question: Veteran is 100% service connected. He expressed extreme frustration with the lack of cultural sensitivity and general discrimination by VA medical personnel towards Native Americans. He has made prior complaints on his own behalf and speaks today on behalf of a brother vet from the Sioux Nation. The Sioux veteran was waiting to be seen. When it was his turn the VA travel clerk was very rude and made fun of the Sioux veterans' last name. The VA person was the same person that this speaker had complained about before. Nothing has been done to improve the VA person's attitude and behavior. The veteran speaking wants the VA person fired and he wants a Native American Tribal Liaison at the VA Medical Center – someone that Native Americans can go to with problems. The speaker stated that his experience and that of the Sioux veteran are not isolated and he believes that Native American veterans deserve better.

Answer:

- Commissioner Ellis said that the Commission will write a letter to the VA Medical Center and deferred to the VA Show Low Clinic staff for further comment/suggestions.
- Corinne Boales, commented that discourtesy is not acceptable behavior from anyone at any level and asked the veteran speaker to see her after the meeting.

Question: What is the current status of veterans' preference in State hiring?

Answer:

- Commissioner Fredericks stated that he knew that State jobs related to law enforcement and corrections give preference to veterans.
- Chairman Dingwall stated that veteran status is a requirement for employment as a veterans' benefits counselor.
- Commissioner McKim observed that legislation is needed to make veterans' preference mandatory state wide.
- Commissioner Fulkerson added that veterans should lobby their local legislators on this issue.

Comment: There needs to be more effective networking between VA and private sector to provide more accessible counseling services to veterans particularly in critical situations. The clinics are too far away and they are not open after hours. There is a tremendous need for Native American counselors on the reservation.

Answer:

- VBC Rodriguez advised that she has taken over all the Native American records from the Flagstaff Arizona Department of Veterans' Services (ADVS) office to allow Martin Vigil to spend more time performing itinerant coverage on the reservation.
- Chairman Dingwall observed that the Director of ADVS has set a goal that no veteran should have to travel more than one hour to reach a benefits counselor.
- Commissioner Ellis added that the Governor issued an executive order that established a Veterans' Task Force to address veterans' issues statewide. One of their recommendations was to increase the number of VBC's from 19 to 60. The legislature authorized 60 counselors over time and limited us to 40 for now. The point being that significant progress has been made. Also ten million dollars was approved for the State Veteran Home in Tucson and will be made available when the VA releases their share of the funding. The Task Force, recognizing the time limitations on their efforts, recommended the establishment of a Veterans' Research Council to continue the analysis of veterans' needs

throughout the state with particular focus on rural veterans. The Arizona Veterans' Research Council created and submitted their recommendations to the Governor in January 2008 with transportation to medical care for rural veterans listed as one of their top priorities. Commissioner Ellis noted that VBC's help identify and advance the issues of veterans in their local areas. The budget situation is now the primary issue, but it will get better.

- Commissioner Fulkerson added that currently there are two bills based on Research Council's recommendations that are working their way through the system.

Question: Can Arizona Veterans program train VBC's for placement?

Answer:

- Commissioner Ellis advised that anyone interested in becoming a VBC should contact Pam Rodriguez at her Show Low office.
- Chairman Dingwall noted that the Director of ADVS has funded four Navajo veterans' to receive VBC training in New Mexico. Each candidate must complete training and then pass a VA examination for accreditation.

Comment: American Legion Veterans' Service Officer (attendee) stated that he wanted to meet with the Native American veteran who earlier addressed difficulties with VA medical system personnel. The VSO stated that he would carry the veteran's concerns forward and see that action is taken. The VSO expressed his personal frustration over his own efforts trying to help veterans with VA entitlements without any resources or outside help. He emphatically reinforced that there is a desperate need for VBC's and mental health counselors in northeast Arizona.

Response:

- Pam Rodriguez observed that the Show Low clinic already needs expansion to meet the demand for services.
- Commissioner Ellis acknowledged the veterans' concerns and advised that the Commissioner's will pass these issues on to the VA.

Question: Why are there no mental health services at Belmont clinic on weekends? This Viet Nam combat veteran stated that he experienced a severe mental health episode on a Saturday. He could not reach anyone at the Belmont Clinic so he drove to VA Medical Center Prescott (roughly 300 miles one way). By the time he got there he was so distraught that he could not face entering the facility. He slept in his car in the VA parking lot and drove back home Sunday morning without having talked to anyone. The veteran observed that he was not interested in what belongs to State and what belongs to Federal jurisdiction. He was a veteran in trouble and could not get any help. That is unacceptable. State, Federal and private sector need to cooperate to fill the tremendous gaps in service availability.

Answer:

- Commissioner Ellis observed that with the increased need generated by returning veterans the VA is going to have to make some changes; they are way behind the power curve.
- Chairman Dingwall observed that one problem for the State when it comes to placing VBC's is office space. He noted that a former Commissioner from Mohave County challenged the County Board of Supervisors to provide free office space for a VBC in Kingman. The Supervisors in cooperation with the County and City officials came up with office space and Kingman now has a fulltime VBC in place to cover northwestern Arizona. If a city or county wants a fulltime VBC they can make it a lot easier to accomplish if they provide free office space.
- Commissioner Fulkerson suggested that a veteran in PTSD crisis may get help from fellow vets or a chaplain and that local veterans might consider starting their own veterans support group. The veteran who had raised the issue countered that help from fellow veterans does not always work.
- Corinne Boales advised that the Show Low clinic has PTSD groups for veterans and groups for spouses. VA clinics can not be open on weekends because they do not have the resources. She stated that she is the Patient Advocate for the Show Low clinic and invited

the audience to pick up her business card. She stated that she does and will make herself available during normal business hours to assist veterans who are having difficulties with the VA.

Comment: The Commission should get answers from the VA and not just say that they will pass on things on.

Response: Corrine Boales reiterated that the Show Low clinic tries to do everything they can for veterans. They will do their best to find solutions when problems are brought to their attention.

Comment: Veteran expressed his gratitude for the VA clinic in Show Low clinic and stated that he is very pleased with the services he receives from the clinic staff.

Comment: Veteran thanked all veterans present for their service and observed that perhaps veterans should not be quite so demanding.

Comment: Pam Rodriguez announced that plans are being made for a veterans' stand down in Show Low on July 23rd and 24th. She also announced that she will continue VBC Martin Vigil outreach schedule every other month.

Vice Chairman Yamanouchi thanked the Show Low clinic staff for their attendance and also thanked Pam Rodriguez for her participation. He commented on the following points:

- Cultural sensitivity: this is an issue that is taken very seriously by the Commissioners.
- Veterans' preference: the Commission will get information and report back.
- Coordination between State and Federal: absolutely agree that improvement is needed but also noted the Commission does routinely pass information on to the appropriate people.

Comment: County Supervisor Candidate Jack Husten stated that if he wins his seat he is very interested in coordinating with his counterparts in Mohave County and the Advisory Commission to help with space for a VBC.

Response: Chairman Dingwall advised that the VBC's collectively cost the State only about 3 million dollars a year but they are instrumental in bring in over 23 million Federal dollars into the State economy annually. VBC's are a good investment; the State can not afford not put VBC's all over the state.

Chairman Dingwall again thanked the American Legion Post 30 for their hospitality and thanked the audience for their attendance.

Adjournment – Chairman Dingwall adjourned the meeting 11:35 a.m. The next meeting will be held at 10:00 a.m. on May 8, 2008 at the Arizona State Veteran Home, 4141 North Third Street, Phoenix Arizona.

Respectfully submitted,

S. Lee Borgen
Acting Recorder